

2015 ASG National Excellence in Teaching Awards

National Award Recipient



Keith McMullen

Albion Park Rail Public School, Albion Park Rail, New South Wales

Keith McMullen teaches at Albion Park Rail Public School in NSW. All of his students have a diagnosis of autism spectrum disorder combined with other diagnoses such as oppositional defiance disorder, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, foetal alcohol syndrome, dyslexia, global development delay, anxiety or depression.

He admits he has a challenging and often volatile environment, and 'what one student requires to self regulate and stay on task often sets another on a speedy road to meltdown.'

For Keith, who says he has a 'burning desire to help people', it's more rewarding than challenging. What he loves most, he says, about teaching students with special needs is 'that even the smallest success is reason for the biggest celebration'.

Keith describes the greatest achievement with his current class as increasing the level of engagement with his students. He is proud that a number of students have shown great improvement in both their academic work and their attitude to school. Developing individualised learning plans is instrumental to Keith's successful teaching, as well as the work he puts into making his students feel physically and emotionally comfortable.

He creates safe workspaces for students where they can be shielded by curtains, as well as breakout workspaces where they can leave the room for a period of time. He also practises relaxation exercises and has created a 'calm room' for students.

Keith's parent community said they were 'thrilled, excited and relieved' to know that their 'children are in safe, inspiring, caring and committed hands'.

Keith's National Award is for Leadership and Development.

| POSITION | OTHER RESPONSIBILITIES | CATEGORY | SUBJECTS/LEVEL TAUGHT | YEARS TEACHING |
|-----------------------------|------------------------|--------------|------------------------|--------------------|
| Teacher | | Primary | Kindergarten to Year 6 | 4 |
| YEARS AT THIS SCHOOL/CENTRE | SCHOOL TYPE | NOMINATED BY | TOWN/SUBURB | STATE AND POSTCODE |
| 4 | Government | Parent | Albion Park Rail | NSW, 2527 |

CONTACT DETAILS:

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What is the most challenging aspect of being a teacher?

The challenge of teaching a special needs students class is attempting to manage the environment in order to reduce stress and enable learning. Teaching special needs in a mainstream school creates many environmental challenges. I need to advocate for the needs of my students across the whole school community. Most importantly I need to champion acceptance and educate students and teachers in relation to the needs of my students.

Another constant challenge is the limited time you have to make a difference. Each of my students has such diverse and specific needs, which requires making constant changes and adjustments to activities, strategies and to routines to meet as many needs of as many students as possible.

There is a lot of discussion at the moment around improving teacher training and teacher quality. What are your thoughts around this? Do you think teacher training and teacher quality needs to be improved in Australia?

On one hand I believe everything can be improved, constant analysis, evaluation and development is the basis of quality practice. It is the way we teach and it is what we are trying to teach our students. On the other hand there is an implication here that the quality and skills of all teachers is in question! There are thousands of amazing and inspirational individuals successfully teaching students everyday in a difficult system. I think that a teacher's ability to meet expected teaching and learning outcomes needs to be supported but this involves much more than the isolated issue of teacher training and teacher quality. The requirements that constitute quality teaching have grown exponentially over the last 10 to 15 years. However very little change has occurred to the structure of the school environment and the parameters around how teaching and learning is delivered within the school setting.

How do you think teacher training could be improved?

No one aspect of teacher training is the key to improvement and there are so many variables affecting quality outcomes for teaching graduates. The past deregulation of university places for teacher training means there is an oversupply of teachers and not enough jobs. Only about half of all graduates end up with full time teaching positions directly after graduation. The other half, are left to languish in the casual and temporary teacher wasteland, often for years. This situation combined with the mistake of equating only the highest academic achievement with quality teaching practice is flawed and unfortunately sees many talented and passionate teachers leaving the profession in order to secure a personally satisfying career and a regular and in many cases much higher income.

What advice would you give a new graduate?

Firstly look for mentors. Great teachers are in every school. You should watch and listen to other teachers, ask for advice, observe how they implement techniques and strategies but also trust your own instincts and ideas and then through practice, you will develop your own style and way of managing things. However, there is no 'one way' that is the best way.

Allow your students to start afresh each day. Do not hold onto feelings caused by a student's poor behaviour. Teaching students with special needs, I focus on resetting after each teaching session throughout the day. Holding on to negative feelings makes creating a positive, supporting and fun learning environment an impossible task.

If there was one aspect of teaching you would like changed, what would it be?

Firstly, reduce graduate numbers to create more certain career pathways. Secondly, looking at the way the curriculum is delivered in the school environment, I think it needs to be acknowledged that teachers work hard and achieve incredible outcomes while doing so within an often antiquated and somewhat broken system. There are not many other professions where the structure of delivery for meeting outcomes has remained unchanged for decades. The hours required to meet all requirements considered essential for quality teaching practice is overwhelming, and to be totally honest can be a low priority in the classroom where a good day can be characterised by students successfully taking turns during an interactive game.

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